

Jewel Mysteries—From a Dealer's Note Book

The Opal of Carmalovitch

BY MAX FEMBERTON

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Darkness had fallen from a dull and humid sky, and the lamps were beginning to struggle for brightness in Piccadilly, when the opal of Carmalovitch was first put into my hand. The day had been a sorry one for business, no light, no sun, no stay of the downpour of penetrating mist which had been swept through the city by the driving south wind from the late dawn to the mock of sunset. I had sat in my private office for six long hours, and I had not seen a customer. The umbrella-bearing throng which trod the street before my window hurried quickly through the mud and the slush, as people who had no leisure even to gaze upon precious stones they could not buy, was going home, in fact, the last sensible proceeding on such an afternoon, and had my hand upon the great safe to it, when the mirror above my desk showed me the reflection of a curious looking man who had entered the outer shop, and stood already at the counter.

At the first glance I judged that this man was no ordinary customer. His dress was altogether singular. He had a black coat, concealing him from the neck to his heels—a coat half smothered in astrachan, and one which could have been made by no English tailor. But his hands were ungloved, and he wore a low hat, which might have been the hat of an officer, but which I could not see from the little window of my private room, which gives my eye command of the shop, that he had come on foot and had no umbrella, was slightly wet. Yet there was a fine bearing about him, and he was clearly a man given to command, for my assistant mounted to my room with his name at the first bidding.

"Does he say what he wants?" I asked, reading the large card upon which were the words—

"STENILOFF CARMALOVITCH,"

but the man replied—

"Only that I must see you immediately. I don't like the look of him at all."

"Is Abel in the shop?"

"He's at the door."

"Very well; let him come to the foot of my stairs, and if I ring as usual, both of you come."

In this profession of jewel selling, for every calling is a profession nowadays, we are so constantly checked by jeweled and jeweled persons, that one or more of us is little moment in a day's work. At my own place of business the material and personal precautions are so organized that the cleverest scoundrel living would be troubled to get free of the shop with six penny worth of booty.

My own room, and my own private armory, are ready at the ring of my bell. Abel is one of them—and a private wire to the nearest police station, from an alcove well hidden on the right hand of the lower room, a man watches by day the large cases, and the smaller gems are shown and by night a couple of special guards have charge of the safe and the premises.

I touch a bell twice, in my room, and my own detective follows any visitor who gives birth in my mind to the slightest doubt. I ring three times, and any obvious person, or prisoner, until the police come. These things are done by most jewelers in the West End, there is nothing in them either unusual or fearful, and so many professional swindlers—so many would-be snappers up of unconsidered and considerable wealth, and so many such as I have named are the least that common sense and common prudence will allow one to take. And they have saved me from loss, and they have saved others again and again.

I had scarcely given my instructions to Michel, my assistant, and a number of intention, and a few of faces, when the shabby-looking man entered.

Michel placed a chair for him on the opposite side of the room, and then he left the room. There was no more greeting between the new-comer and myself than a mutual nodding of heads; and he on his part fell at once upon his business.

He took a large paper parcel from the inside pocket of his coat and began to unpack it; but he was so much interested in both brown and tissue, that I had some moments of leisure in which to examine him more closely before we got to talk.

I set him down in my mind as a man hovering on the boundary line of the middle age, a man with infinite distinction marked in a somewhat worn face, and with some of the oldest clothes under the shielding long coat that I have ever looked upon. These I saw when he unbuttoned the enveloping cloak to get at his parcel in the inner pocket, and while he undid it, I could observe that his fingers were thin as the talons of a bird, and that he trembled as he dealt with the mere effort of unloosing the string.

The operation lasted some minutes. He spoke no word during that time, but when he had reduced the coil of brown paper to a tiny square of wash-leather, I asked him:

"Have you something to show me?"

He looked up at me with a pair of intensely, ridiculously blue eyes, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Should I undo all these papers if I had not?" he responded, and I saw at once that he was a man of a high verbal point of view, stood objectionably upon the defensive.

"What sort of a stone is it?" I went on in a somewhat interested tone of voice, "not a ruby, I hope. I have just bought a parcel of rubies."

By way of answer he opened the little wash-leather bag, and taking up my jewel-tones, which lay at his hand, he held up an opal of such prodigious size and quality that I retained it with difficulty from crying out at the sight of it. It was a Carwintza stone, I saw at a glance, almost a perfect circle in shape, and at my touch it flashed in diamond-like fire. There was a touch of the oxide in its color which gave it the faintest suggestion of black, but its light, and its wealth of hue and dazzling richness in its general quality, it surpassed

any stone I have ever known, even that in the imperial cabinet at Vienna. So brilliant was it, so fascinating in the ever-changing play of its variegations, so perfect in every characteristic of the finest, faultless gem that for some moments I let the man hold it out to me, and said no word. There was running through my mind the question of circumstances: Where had he got it from? He had stolen it, I concluded at the first thought; and again, the second, How could a man who wore rags under an astrachan coat have come to the possession of a gem upon which the most commercial instinct would have hesitated to set a price?

I had fully determined that I was face to face with a swindler, when his exclamations reminded me that he expected me to speak.

"Well," he said, "are you frightened to look at it?"

"He had been holding out the stone, in which he gripped the stone lightly, for some seconds, and I had not yet ventured to touch them, sitting, I do not doubt, with surprise written all over my face. But when he spoke, I took the opal from him, and turned my strong glass upon it."

"You seem to have brought me a fine thing," I said as carelessly as I could.

"It is a stone with a history, at least, none that I should care to write."

"And yet?"

"And yet," he answered, "there cannot be three larger opals in Europe; do you know the stone at Vienna?"

Perfectly, but it has not the black of this, and in contrast, this is an older, so far as the birth of its discovery goes, by a hundred years.

I thought that I had such a poor one, but when he spoke, I took the opal from him, and turned my strong glass upon it."

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"I know! oh, I know so well; and I have asked him many times," she answered; "but you can believe me, he will tell of his past to no one, not even to me. But he is honest and true; there is not such a man in all your city—and he has suffered. You may buy this beautiful thing now, and you will never regret it. I tell you so from all my heart."

"But surely, madame, said I."

"You must see that I cannot pay such a price as your husband is asking for his property if he will not even tell me who he is, or where he comes from."

"Yes, that is it—not even to me has he spoken of these things. I was married to him six years now at Naples, and he has always had the opal with him, and he has always told me that this alone is left to us. You will buy it of me."

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